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ABSTRACT

This study examined stability and change in gender role stereotypes by comparing responses to items on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) for the typical woman and man in 1978 and in 1986. Subjects were college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course in 1978 (N=85) and in 1986 (N=219). Subjects rated the typical man or typical woman by completing a 40-item questionnaire which alternated the 20 feminine and 20 masculine role descriptors from the BSRI. Stability of gender stereotypes was found for many traits. However, between 1978 and 1986 there were increases in the ratings for women on masculine traits and in the number of masculine traits ascribed equally to women and men. These results reflect a more androgynous view of females in 1986 than in 1978, with this view held somewhat more strongly by women than by men. There was no corresponding increase in the ascription of feminine traits to men, indicating fewer changes in perceptions of men than of women. This may suggest increasing role flexibility for women, but not for men. (Author/NB)

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Gender Trait Stereotypes: A Comparison of 1978 and 1986

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Running head: GENDER STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

Persistence and change in gender role stereotypes was investigated by comparing responses to items on the Bem Sex Role Inventory for the typical woman and man in 1978 and 1986. Stability of gender stereotypes was found for many traits. However, between 1978 and 1986 there were increases in the ratings for women on masculine traits and in the number of masculine traits ascribed equally to women and men. These results reflect a more androgynous view of females in 1986 than 1978, with this view held somewhat more strongly by women than men. There was no corresponding increase in the ascription of feminine traits to men, indicating fewer changes in perceptions of men than women. This may suggest increasing role flexibility for women, but not for men.

Gender Trait Stereotypes: A Comparison of 1978 and 1986

Characteristics associated with the instrumental role have traditionally been considered masculine and ascribed to males, while characteristics associated with the expressive role have been considered femininine and ascribed to females. Currently, genders are seen as differing in the degree to which they possess these traits, rather than being seen as possessing only one or the other set of traits. Gender differences in traits are considered important because they have often been theoretically linked with gender role behaviors, gender role identification, and gender role relevant cognitive schema (Spence, Deaux & Helmreich, 1985).

Recently there has been much interest in the relative stability of gender role stereotypes. Some studies reported a reduction in traditionalism in perceptions of gender appropriate behaviors during the 1970s (Helmreich, Spence, & Gibson, 1982; McBroom, 1984). However, the results of these studies were not entirely consistent. McBroom (1984) found that the change toward egalitarianism between 1975 and 1980 was much larger for women than men, while Helmreich, Spence, and Gibson (1982) found similar egalitarian movement for both men and women between 1972 and 1976, but a reversal for women between 1976 and 1980.

Studies focusing on perceptions of personal traits characterizing men and women have tended to show more stability in these stereotypes (Gilbert, Deutsch, & Strahan, 1978; Ruble, 1983; Spence, Deaux & Helmreich, 1985; Werner & LaRussa, 1985). Werner

and LaRussa found that while the majority of adjectives which were stereotypic descriptors of men and women in 1957 also discriminated between them in 1978, changes which had occurred during that period reflected more positive views of women and less positive views of men.

Comparative studies with data collected in the mid-1980's have not been available to suggest what more recent changes may have occurred in gender role stereotypes. The present study investigated the change and stability of gender trait stereotypes by using the characteristics comprising the masculinity and the femininity scales of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem 1974) to compare the stereotypes of personal traits characterizing typical men and women in 1978 and 1986.

Method

Subjects. The participants were students in introductory psychology classes at Missouri Southern State College who participated in order to receive extra credit or to fulfill a course requirement. The college is a rural, primarily commuter school enrolling approximately 4500 students. There were 85 participants in 1978 and 219 in 1986.

Procedure. A forty item questionnaire was constructed by alternating the 20 feminine and 20 masculine role descriptors from the BSRI (Bem 1974). Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale with the anchors of never, sometimes, and always centered over the numbers 1, 4, and 7, respectively. Students completed

the questionnaire in their classes, where group size ranged from 12 to 43. All students received the same instructions, except for the gender they were to rate. Students were told to think of the average or typical woman (man) and to circle the number for each of the 40 items that best represents the average or typical woman (man). In the 1978 sample 28 males and 26 females rated the typical man, while 16 males and 15 females rated the typical woman. In the 1986 sample 41 males and 82 females rated the typical man, while 37 males and 59 females rated the typical woman.

Results

Ratings for each of the forty descriptors were analyzed separately by an unequal-n unweighted means 2 X 2 X 2 analysis of variance with the factors of gender rated (female vs. male), gender of the rater (female vs. male) and year (1978 vs. 1986). Out of the 12160 responses, 60 were omitted because they were missing or unreadable.

For the masculine role descriptors, there was a significant effect of gender rated on 15 of the 20 items (Table 1), with the typical male rated higher than the typical female on each of these items. There were significant interactions between gender rated and year on five items: acts as a leader, $F(1, 296) = 5.66$, $p < .05$, aggressive, $F(1,292) = 4.03$, $p < .05$, self-sufficient, $F(1,295) = 8.96$, $p < .01$, dominant, $F(1,296) = 6.44$, $p < .05$, and independent, $F(1,295) = 5.38$, $p < .05$. Simple effects

analyses indicated that the typical female received higher ratings in 1986 than 1978 for acts as a leader, $F(1,296) = 13.73$, $p < .01$, aggressive, $F(1,292) = 8.85$, $p < .05$, self-sufficient, $F(1,295) = 6.18$, $p < .05$, dominant, $F(1,296) = 5.41$, $p < .05$, and independent, $F(1,295) = 8.56$, $p < .05$ (Table 1). There were no significant effects of year for ratings of the typical male on these items. Additional analyses indicated there were significant differences between the ratings of typical males and typical females for both 1978 and 1986 on all of the traits except for the 1986 ratings for self-sufficient and independent. The effect for self-reliant, which approached significance, $F(1,294) = 3.58$, $p = .059$, had a similar pattern of means to the other interactions.

There were significant interactions of the gender rated with the gender of the rater for acts as a leader, $F(1,296) = 5.21$, $p < .05$, willing to take risks, $F(1,294) = 6.03$, $p < .05$, and has leadership ablities, $F(1,294) = 8.47$, $p < .05$. The simple effects analyses revealed a significant effect of gender of the rater on ratings for the typical female (Table 2), with the typical female rated significantly higher on these traits by women than by men, while the ratings for the typical male target were not influenced by the gender of the rater.

The three-way interactions for strong personality, $F(1,295) = 6.60$, $p < .05$ and competitive, $F(1,293) = 4.22$, $p < .05$, were significant. The simple effects analyses indicated significant

interactions between year and gender of the rater for ratings of the typical female for both strong personality, $F(1,295) = 6.86$, $p < .05$ and competitive, $F(1,293) = 4.03$, $p < .05$, but not for ratings of the typical male. Further analyses indicated that for both items in 1978 the ratings by females were significantly higher than ratings by males (strong personality, $F(1,295) = 6.67$, $p < .05$, $Ms = 5.27$ and 4.31; competitive $F(1,293) = 3.91$, $p < .05$, $Ms = 4.67$ and 3.88). Higher ratings by males in 1986 resulted in no significant differences in ratings by males and females.

For a few traits there were main effects of year and gender of the rater which were not constrained by interactions. Significant effects of year were found on ambitious, $F(1,294) = 13.27$, $p < .01$, assertive, $F(1,295) = 8.05$, $p < .01$, and makes decisions easily, $F(1,295) = 4.28$, $p < .05$. The ratings for each of these traits were higher in 1986 than in 1978. There were significant effects of gender of the rater for masculine, $F(1,294) = 9.39$, $p < .01$, individualistic $F(1,296) = 11.62$, $p < .01$, and analytical $F(1,290) = 4.34$, $p < .05$, with females' giving higher ratings than males for each trait.

For the feminine role descriptors the typical female was rated significantly higher than the typical male on 19 of the 20 traits (Table 3). There was a significant effect of the gender rated on the remaining trait, child-like, but for this trait the typical male was rated higher than the typical female. The only significant interaction between gender rated and year was for the

descriptor feminine, $F(1,295) = 13.49$, $p < .01$. Simple effects analysis showed a significant effect for year when the gender rated was female, $F(1,295) = 9.84$, $p < .01$, with higher ratings n 1986 than in 1978 (Table 3). Ratings of feminine for the typical male were lower in 1986 than in 1978, but not significantly different.

Five of the feminine traits had significant interactions between the gender rated and the gender of the rater. There were similar interactions for eager to sooth hurt feelings, $F(1,296) = 5.88$, $p < .05$ and affectionate, $F(1,295) = 4.59$, $p < .05$. Simple effects analyses indicated that the typical woman was rated higher on eager to sooth hurt feelings and affectionate by female raters than by male raters (Table 2). There were not significant gender differences in the way that the typical male was rated on these traits. The interactions for loyal, $F(1,296) = 4.08$, $p < .05$ and child-like, $F(1,296) = 16.73$, $p < .01$ appear to reflect a tendency for raters to see their own gender in a more favorable light. Simple effects analyses showed that the typical male was rated as significantly more loyal and less child-like by males than females (Table 2). The effects were not significant for the typical female, but female's ratings tended to be higher for loyal and lower for child-like. For yielding, $F(1,296) = 4.88$, $p < .05$, there was a significant interaction of gender rated by gender of the rater; however, the simple effects of gender of the rater were not significant for either gender rated. Further probing of the

interaction showed that female raters rated the typical female as more yielding than the typical male, $F(1,295) = 17.41$, $p < .001$, while male raters did not rate the genders differently.

There was a significant three-way interaction on does not use harsh language, $F(1,296) = 4.87$, $p < .05$. Simple effects analyses showed a significant interaction of year and gender of the rater for the typical male, $F(1,296) = 5.71$, $p < .05$, but not for the typical female. Further analysis for the typical male in 1978 showed that females' ratings were lower ($M = 2.77$) than males' ($M = 3.96$), $F(1,296) = 10.33$, $p < .01$. In 1986 there was no significant difference between females' ($M = 3.35$) and males' ($M = 3.46$) ratings of the typical male.

Several of the feminine traits had main effects of year and gender of the rater which were not constrained by interactions. Significant effects of year were found for warm, $F(1,294) = 7.09$, $p < .01$, cheerful, $F(1,295) = 7.75$, $p < .01$, gentle, $F(1,294) = 9.08$, $p < .01$, loyal, $F(1,296) = 9.58$, $p < .01$, and sensitive, $F(1,295) = 3.92$, $p < .05$. For each of these traits the ratings were higher in 1986 than 1978. There were significant effects of the gender of the rater, with females giving higher ratings than males on flatterable, $F(1,296) = 5.87$, $p < .05$, tender, $F(1,294) = 10.41$, $p = .01$, and soft-spoken, $F(1,294) = 7.76$, $p < .01$. Males gave higher ratings than females for shy, $F(1,296) = 5.09$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Two major patterns emerged from this study. First,

relatively strong gender role stereotypes appear to have persisted from 1978 to 1986. Secondly, stereotypes of women seem to have changed more than stereotypes of men. These changes appear to reflect a more androgynous perception of women than men, with the perceptions for the typical woman consistently high on feminine traits and increasing on masculine traits, while the perceptions for the typical man were consistently high on masculine traits without increases on feminine traits.

The persistence of gender role stereotypes was demonstrated by the presence of overall differences in the ratings of the typical man and woman which were not constrained by interactions with year for 27 of the 40 descriptors (18 feminine, 9 masculine). In addition, there were no descriptors which stereotyped one gender in 1978 that reversed and stereotyped the other gender in 1986. Overall, these results suggest that there are still distinct differences in how people perceive the typical woman and man. These stereotypic ratings are consistent with the position that some people have different schemas for women and men (Bem, 1981) which may influence a wide variety of behaviors, including the processing of information about women and men.

The second major pattern involves the changes in stereotypes between 1978 and 1986, particularly for the ratings of masculine descriptors. Between 1978 and 1986 ratings for the typical female increased dramatically for five of the twenty masculine traits. The increases for independent and self-sufficient were

large enough to eliminate any reliable differences between the typical male and typical female on these items in 1986. These results, coupled with the five masculine descriptors which produced no reliable overall differences (individualistic, strong personality, ambitious, analytical, and defends own beliefs), indicate that in 1986 seven of the twenty masculine descriptors do not produce higher ratings for the typical male than the typical female. Although men were rated higher than women on acts as a leader, dominant, and aggressive in 1986, the ratings for women had increased substantially over the 1978 ratings. The large increase in ratings for typical females between 1978 and 1986 on these three descriptors would suggest that future studies may show even fewer stereotypic masculine descriptors.

Some of the results also suggest that females may have a more androgynous view of women than do males. Females rated women higher than males did on acts as a leader, willing to take risks, and has leadership abilities. Males rated men much higher than women on these traits. Changes in males' perceptions of women may be following the changes in females' perceptions, as evidenced by the low ratings males gave women on strong personality and competitive in 1978 compared to females ratings in 1978 and their own ratings in 1986.

These results are consistent with those of McBroom (1984) which indicated less traditionalism in 1980 than in 1975 and more changes in the stereotypes held by women than men. Our results

(1982). Their results with the Attitude Toward Women Scale indicated little change in men's stereotypes between 1976 and 1980, while women became more conservative over the same period. The differences in the present study and Helmreich, et.al. may reflect differences in the aspects of the stereotypes that were being measured or change which has occurred in the six years after the Helmreich, et.al. data were collected.

The changes in ratings for descriptors associated with the feminine role did not support a similar more androgynous view of men. While women received ratings equivalent to men on 7 of the 20 masculine descriptors, men received ratings equivalent to women on none of the feminine descriptors. In fact, there was a slight tendency toward greater differences in ratings for males and females on the feminine traits in 1986 than in 1978.

The stereotypic differences for masculine and feminine traits found in this study were consistent with those found in previous research. The data for 1978 from this study were highly consistent with other data collected that year (Ruble, 1983; Werner & LaRussa, 1985). Twelve of the items (8 masculine, 4 feminine) used by Ruble (1983) were identical or highly similar to descriptors used in the present study and all twelve produced similar stereotypic ratings. Six of seven identical masculine traits used by Werner and LaRussa (1985) also produced stereotypic ratings similar to ours. In addition, the overall masculinity and femininity scores for both male and female raters

masculinity and femininity scores for both male and female raters were very similar to the ratings reported by Gilbert, Deutsch, and Strahan (1978).[1]

The 1986 results were somewhat consistent with data collected by Heerboth and Ramanaiah (1985). They also found no reliable differences in ratings for the typical female and typical male on individualistic, strong personality, ambitious, analytical, independent and self-sufficient. They did find higher ratings for males than females on defends own beliefs. However, they found no reliable differences for an additional 5 masculine and 3 feminine traits. Direct comparisons of these data are difficult, given that they did not have comparison data from previous years and their procedure involved subjects rating both the typical male and female, instead of rating only one gender. This may have lead to sensitization of the participants to the task, resulting in fewer stereotypic ratings.

Overall, gender stereotypes have remained relatively stable, with greater changes occurring in the stereotypes for women than men. The perception of an increase on masculine traits by women has not been matched by the perception of an increase on feminine traits by men. The increase in instrumental characteristics ascribed to women suggests that our society may be moving toward more flexibility in the roles of women. However, the stereotypes of males still do not incorporate expressive characteristics, limiting their perceived role flexibility. This difference may

reflect the higher value our society has traditionally placed on the instrumental role than the expressive role. However, if this trend continues, we may find that women will have greater role flexibility than men, allowing women to deal more effectively than men with a wider range of situations.

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Author Notes

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Due to equivalent input, the order of authorship was determined by a coin toss. Request for reprints should be sent to either author at the Department of Psychology, Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri 64801.

Footnotes

[1]Separate analyses of the 1978 data were conducted in order to allow comparison with Ruble (1983) and Werner & LaRussa (1985). In addition, overall masculinity and femininity scores were computed for our data in order to compare them to the scores obtained in 1975 by Gilbert, Deutsch, and Strahan (1978) for their "typical" condition. Comparison of the eight means for the gender rated by gender of the rater on the masculinity and femininity scales for the two studies found seven were different by .25 or less, indicating highly similar results with the two student samples from different locations; their's came from Iowa State University.

Table 1. Mean Rating for Each Gender for Descriptors Associated with the Masculine Role

	1978		1986		Combined		
Descriptor	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	F-ratio
Acts as a leader	3.81	4.94	4.52	5.01	4.35	4.99	35.56***
Aggressive	3.84	5.13	4.55	5.21	4.37	5.18	37.48***
Self-sufficient	4.06	5.20	4.71	4.85	4.55	4.96	7.65**
Dominant	3.29	5.31	3.93	5.02	3.77	5.11	74.83***
Independent	4.29	5.33	5.03	5.34	4.85	5.34	12.06***
Self-reliant	4.07	5.13	4.71	5.11	4.55	5.12	15.58***
Willing to take risks	3.84	5.09	4.28	5.02	4.17	5.05	43.50***
Assertive	4.35	4.78	4.75	5.22	4.65	5.08	11.82***
Willing to take a stand	4.74	5.11	4.95	5.21	4.90	5.18	3.99*
Athletic	4.00	5.04	4.17	5.43	4.13	5.33	96.57***
Competitive	4.26	5.47	4.97	5.66	4.79	5.60	40.09***
Forceful	3.61	4.81	3.84	4.67	3.79	4.71	42.54***
Masculine	2.65	5.44	2.58	5.69	2.60	5.61	649.07***
Makes decisions easily	3.55	4.31	4.03	4.56	3.91	4.48	16.56***
Has leadership abilities	4.06	4.96	4.68	5.07	4.53	5.04	18.35***
Individualistic	4.58	4.81	4.85	4.85	4.79	4.84	<1
Strong personality	4.77	4.81	5.28	5.23	5.16	5.10	<1
Ambitious	4.84	5.06	5.55	5.42	5.37	5.31	<1
Analytical	3.90	4.17	4.24	4.26	4.16	4.24	<1
Defends own beliefs	5.06	5.33	5.39	5.42	5.31	5.40	<1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Gender Rated by Gender of the Rater Interaction Means and Simple Effects F-ratios

	Typical Female			Typical Male		
Rated By	F	M	F-ratio	F	M	F-ratio
Masculine Descriptors						
Acts as a leader	4.64	3.94	16.96***	5.04	4.91	<1
Willing to take risks	4.46	3.77	11.43***	5.04	5.06	<1
Has leadership abilities	4.88	4.04	20.47***	5.08	4.97	<1
Feminine Descriptors						
Eager to soothe hurt feelings	5.59	4.70	14.78***	4.38	4.23	<1
Affectionate	6.00	5.57	4.84*	4.76	4.88	<1
Child-like	3.68	4.15	3.39	4.70	3.77	17.93***
Loyal	5.24	5.13	<1	4.56	5.06	6.69*
Yielding	4.58	4.19	3.74	3.87	4.01	<1

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 3. Mean Rating for Each Gender for Descriptors Associated with the Feminine Role

	1978		1986		Combined		
Descriptor	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	F-ratio
Feminine	5.76	2.31	5.92	1.99	5.75	2.09	954.21***
Flatterable	5.19	4.61	5.43	4.82	5.37	4.76	20.62***
Warm	5.42	4.44	5.69	4.89	5.63	4.76	47.12***
Understanding	5.26	4.43	5.39	4.48	5.35	4.47	43.22***
Affectionate	5.52	4.68	5.92	4.86	5.82	4.81	60.92***
Tender	5.13	4.09	5.61	4.21	5.49	4.18	107.12***
Compassionate	5.10	4.43	5.77	4.46	5.61	4.45	71.07***
Does not use harsh language	3.84	3.39	4.15	3.39	4.07	3.39	17.09***
Soft-spoken	4.42	3.33	4.68	3.48	4.61	3.43	68.88***
Gentle	5.00	4.02	5.59	4.37	5.45	4.26	84.82***
Loves children	5.45	4.44	5.57	4.56	5.54	4.52	47.36***
Eager to sooth hurt feelings	4.77	4.20	5.36	4.37	5.22	4.32	34.93***
Sensitive to the needs of others	5.13	4.21	5.55	4.43	5.45	4.36	60.84***
Yielding	4.58	3.89	4.36	3.94	4.42	3.93	14.26***
Sympathetic	5.13	4.37	5.56	4.33	5.46	4.34	58.79***
Gullible	4.29	3.98	4.53	3.94	4.47	3.95	10.35**
Cheerful	4.71	4.61	5.29	4.84	5.15	4.77	11.25**
Loyal	4.65	4.56	5.38	4.84	5.20	4.75	7.63**
Shy	3.97	3.57	4.11	3.73	4.08	3.68	7.55**
Child-like	3.52	4.13	3.99	4.43	3.87	4.34	8.11**

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$